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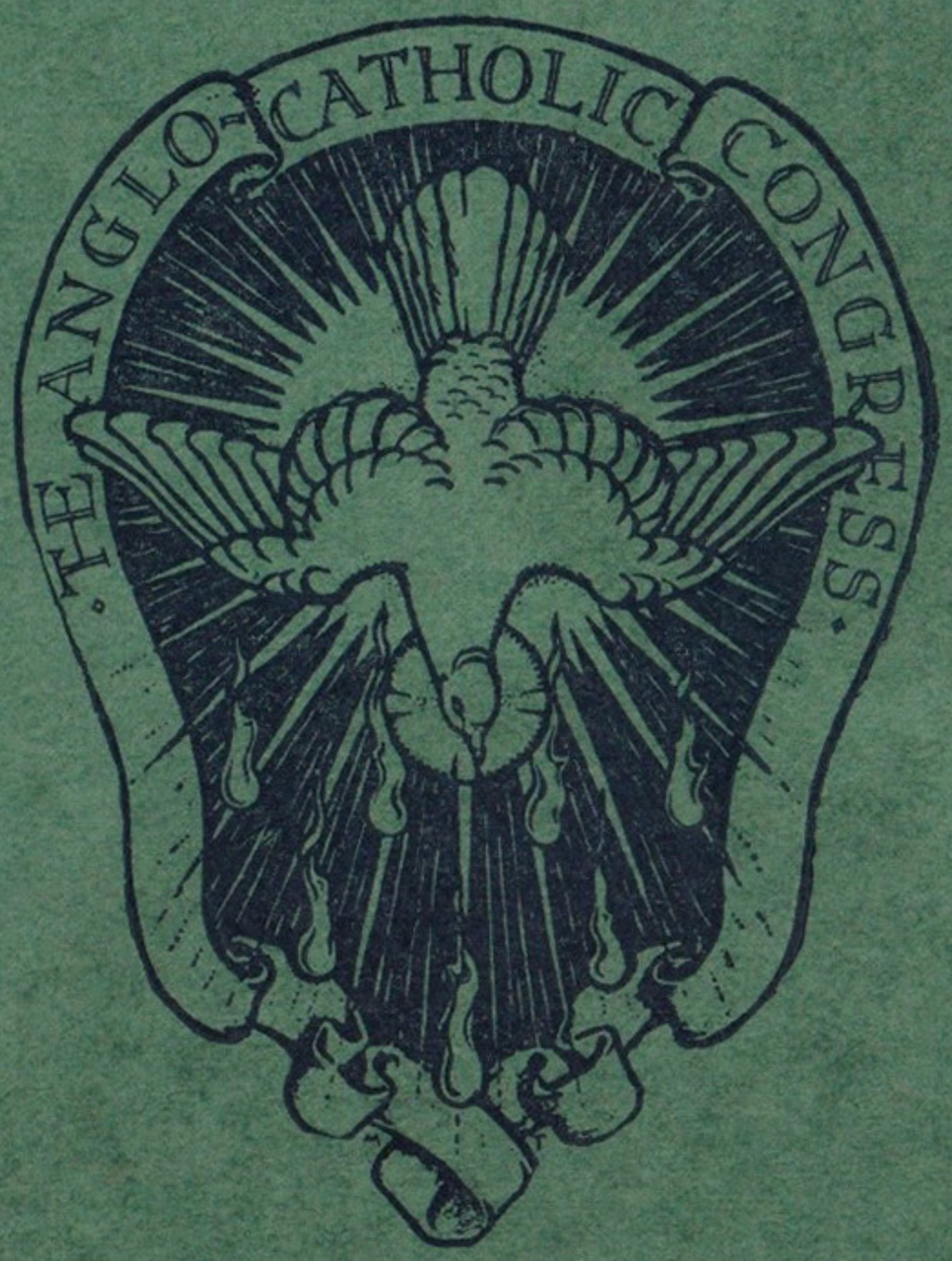
THE CONGRESS BOOKS: No. 48

THE INVOCATION OF SAINTS



By G. H. CLAYTON

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The Invocation of Saints

THE Christian Church is a great family—the family of God. When we were baptized we were born again, made members of that family, brought into relationship with all its members. One of the weaknesses of English religion has been the extremely inadequate degree in which we realize our membership in that family: though members of a family, we try to live our religious lives as if we were isolated individuals. This weakness shows itself in the very meagre degree of fellowship which is attained even between members of the same communion. It shows itself also in almost complete forgetfulness of the great majority of members of our family, the holy souls in Paradise and the saints triumphant in heaven: and it is with this last point that this paper has to deal.

If the Christian creed is true, it must follow that for a Christian the fact that he is a Christian should be the most important fact about him. In proportion as a man's religion is real, it becomes a link uniting him with others whose religion is also real. The fact

that two persons are both 'in Christ' constitutes a link between them which is more important and more fundamental than the differences caused by race, colour, or social position. We can go further than this. For it is certain that a Christian does not cease to be 'in Christ' when he departs this life. We come then to the conclusion that the link constituted by the fact that both are 'in Christ,' is stronger than the barrier caused by death. We are fundamentally closer to the dead in Christ than to the living who are not 'in Christ,' even though these latter live in the same house as ourselves.

The reaction at the time of the Reformation against the abuses condemned in the Twenty-second Article of Religion has led to the obscuring of this truth among English Christians; and that has brought with it a very serious loss. The almost complete absence of all memory of the saints from the religious thought and prayers of Christian people has led to a serious lowering of the Christian ideal. For the saints are the heroes of our family. We have come to think of the highest type of Christianity as a commonplace respectability. We have forgotten the heroic types of saintliness, and this has impoverished our religious thought. It has been a main cause why the Church has, on the whole, failed to enlist in her service many of those who in a real sense 'hunger and thirst after righteousness,' failed to enlist

the heroic qualities, and the capacity for heroic sacrifice which still belongs to our race.

Further, we have lost the help that comes from the sense that we belong to a mighty company, that we are not alone, that, when we pray, we are joining our prayers to a great volume of prayer which is always ascending to the throne of God. And, lastly, by ignoring the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, we have brought about the revival amongst us of the ancient practices of Spiritualism, a deadly heresy which has destroyed the spiritual life of very many.

For these reasons there is a great need of the restoration among us of a sense of fellowship with all those who are members of the body of Christ, whether they be still alive on this earth, or whether they have departed this life, to be 'with Christ, which is far better.' And there can be no spiritual fellowship which is not a fellowship in prayer. It would seem, therefore, that the 'invocation of saints,' that is, the calling upon the saints to pray for us, is a practice of which the wider use would do much for religion among us.

But difficulties are felt by many about this practice. In the first place it is held that there is but one mediator, Jesus Christ, both God and Man, and that to ask the saints for their prayers is to run the risk of ignoring this fact. This objection seems to apply with equal force to the practice of asking our

fellow Christians in this life to pray for us. But the duty of intercession is emphasized in the Bible, and no one seems to feel that it is a derogation from the unique position of our Lord as the one mediator to ask for the intercessions of a friend.

It is important that we should remember the presence of Christ in, and the action of Christ through, the members of his body, the Church; acts of Christian love, such as intercession for others, are the acts of Christ performed through the members of his body, and we are told that 'the supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working' (*James* v. 16). If there is no inconsistency between an act of intercession for another and the sincere belief that our Lord is the one mediator, neither can there be an inconsistency between that belief and the asking for the prayers of one who has departed this life.

We certainly want to avoid anything of the nature of polytheism, or treating the saints as in any way equal to God. But the practice of asking the saints for their prayers is not likely to lead to polytheism, any more than is the practice of asking our friends in this life to pray for us. The mere fact that it is their prayers for which we ask of itself constitutes a safeguard. It is a further safeguard if the practice of the Easterns is adopted, of asking for the prayers, not only of the saints triumphant, but also of one's own friends who

have departed this life; for a man is very unlikely to put his own friends in the position of God, or to treat them as mediators. But this matter will be discussed later.

THE second difficulty is a more real one. What reason have we to suppose that the departed can hear our prayers, or that they interest themselves in our affairs? What indication there is in the New Testament seems to support the view that they do, though there is nothing in the way of explicit statement. 'There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth' (*St. Luke* xv. 10). 'Ye are come . . . to innumerable hosts of angels, to the general assembly and Church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect' (*Hebr.* xii. 22, 23). Such passages suggest that among the great company of spirits about the throne of God there is interest in and knowledge of earthly happenings.

In the case of the saints triumphant in heaven it would seem to be natural to suppose that as they behold the vision of God, brought near to the source of all truth, they come to share his knowledge. At the very least, we

cannot but suppose that they know whatever God wills them to know, and the Christian conception of God would lead us to think that God must will them to know enough to be able to pray for their brethren. Clearly it is a matter where one can only speak with reserve. There may be things which God may not will them to know. If so, it is at any rate inconceivable that God should be displeased because one still on earth asks his brother in Christ for his prayers.

The saints triumphant know what God wills them to know. Our knowledge of the character of God leads us to think that he wills them to know our needs, that they may pray for us. For if our brothers here on earth can help us by their prayers—and that no Christian man would deny—then, if the spirits of just men made perfect pray for us too, their prayers must be of even greater value to us, in proportion as they are nearer to God and able to pray with a more single-minded devotion and a greater faith.

Among Roman Catholics the tendency has been to confine invocation to the saints triumphant. Doubt has been felt whether the holy souls still in Paradise, who have not attained to their final consummation and bliss, can have the knowledge of our needs necessary to enable them to pray for us. In Russia, on the other hand, it has been customary for Christians to ask their departed

relatives and friends to pray for them. What has been said above would seem to suggest that the Russian practice is right. For it is the Christian view that the dead are nearer to our Lord than the living, and there seems no reason why God should not make known to them enough to enable them to pray with understanding.

We must again speak with reserve. But to the present writer it seems inconceivable either that the state of departed Christians is not one that admits of prayer, or that such prayer would not include intercession for those they loved on earth. They are undergoing a purgation—a spiritual development to fit them for heaven. How can there be spiritual development without prayer? It seems impossible. And how can there be spiritual development if prayer is all selfish? There must be prayer for others. If that is not so, we must revise our whole conception of the spiritual life, and the Church must be quite wrong in her interpretation of the teaching of our Lord.

There is another difficulty which is widely felt, and which is akin to the last: that is, the difficulty of supposing that those who are not divine can attend to so many people asking them for their prayers at the same time. This problem, so stated, appears to be rather crude, but it is really felt as a difficulty. It is perfectly true that in this world a man

finds it difficult to respond to all the calls for his intercession which are made upon him. His power of attention fails. But physical death carries with it the removal of some at any rate of the limitations of earthly existence, and as a soul draws nearer to our Lord, it is but reasonable to suppose that that soul's power of understanding sympathy is increased. There is no reason why we should set limits, which in the nature of the case must be arbitrary, to the effects of the work of grace in the soul.

A further general consideration must be kept in mind. There are two ways in which it is possible to conceive of the approach to God. There is the way of separation from all other things. In accordance with this conception men have tried to find God by shutting themselves off from the thought of anything or anybody except him. That method has been not uncommon in the history of the Christian Church, and the following of that method would seem to lead to a denial of the desirability of the invocation of saints.

But that is not the method which is characteristically Christian. The teaching and example of our Lord point rather to another method, the method of the love of others; and that method seems to be indicated by the conception of God as Love. Our Lord's communion with his Father was not hindered by his interest in and love of man. We read

that in the highest moment of his communion with his Father, when it was so close and intimate that his very form was transfigured, 'behold two men were talking with him.' The same lesson is taught by the doctrine of the Church—that men are not saved in isolation, but in a community, the family of God. The same lesson is taught by the doctrine of the Holy Communion—that the same act which brings about communion with God brings about also communion with one another.

These considerations suggest that the fellowship of prayer between us and the saints is not to be contrasted with direct approach to God, but is rather a method of approach to God which is entirely congruous with the Christian religion as it is revealed in holy Scripture, and with the other doctrines of the Church. And, if we may look at the matter from the other side, it would appear that the state of Christian perfection attained by the saints must be one in which contemplation of the vision of God is not inconsistent with the deepest possible interest in, and love of, the souls of men. Such interest and love clearly involve prayer, and if the saints who have won their battle can pray for us while we are in the midst of the conflict, there can be nothing wrong in our asking them to do so.

IT is thought by some that, because it is impossible to be absolutely certain that the saints can hear our prayers, it is safer to ask God that we may be benefited by the prayers of the saints, rather than to address the saints directly. For there can be no shadow of doubt that God can, if he will, grant such a prayer. This practice is known as 'comprecation;' and some, who hesitate to recommend direct invocation, are ready to approve of this.

Theologically, there can be no objection to comprecation. But the difficulty about it is a practical one. It lacks the simplicity and directness which are required in prayer. It may be doubted whether the use of comprecation in private prayer does not in the majority of cases lead on to direct invocation, and it is difficult to suppose that there is any real difference. If we may ask God that we may be benefited by the prayers of the saints, and if, in answer to our prayer, God makes our request known to the saints, it would seem to follow that a direct address to the saints would lead to the same result.

Either they are able to hear our prayers or they are not. If they are, then it cannot but be right for us to ask them for their prayers. If they are not, it involves a curiously hard and mechanical conception of prayer to suppose that God, who would make our requests

known to the saints if we asked him directly to do so, will not bring it about that the saints know our requests when we address ourselves directly to them. In any case the value of the prayers of the saints depends upon the will of God. If it is God's will that they should pray for us, then we co-operate with that will, whether we ask them directly to pray for us, or whether we ask him that they should pray for us. To approve of comprecation and to disapprove of invocation, would seem to involve a kind of legalism which is alien to the Christian conception of God.

It may be admitted that there are dangers in connexion with the practice of invocation, and that these dangers have not always been avoided. The practice of asking a saint for a gift instead of asking for his prayers may easily lead to misunderstanding. The intention of such requests is that the saint should help his suppliant to the attainment of the desired end by his prayers. But it is better that that intention should be clearly expressed in the petition. The assignment of certain departments to certain saints, so that a man prays to one particular saint for one particular thing, and to another saint for another thing, comes dangerously near to practical polytheism. But that is not the particular danger of English religion.

After all, there is none of the customs of the Church which cannot be misused. The

thing that should have been for our help may be to us an occasion of falling. Sacraments may be misused. Even intercession may be misused. The Bible may be misused. But we do not suggest the abolition of sacraments, the cessation of intercession, or the withdrawal of the open Bible. In the present state of English religion there is far more danger of the degradation of the Christian ideal, through forgetfulness of the saints and heroes of the Christian Church, of loss of the sense of fellowship through neglect of the doctrine of the unity of the body of Christ, of the growth of heresy through the omission to teach truth, than there is of a superstitious reversion to polytheistic saint-worship. We must take some risks, or we can make no advance. In this particular instance the risk is extremely small.

Lastly, we must not be frightened by the accusation that invocation of saints is a practice which is not countenanced by the Church of England. It is quite true that after the Reformation invocations were omitted from the public worship of the English Church. It is true also that 'the Romish doctrine concerning invocation of saints' is condemned in the Twenty-second Article of Religion. But that article was written before the subject was discussed at the great reforming Roman Catholic Council of Trent, so that it cannot be the doctrine as formulated in that Council

that the Article condemns. It is quite certain that abuses were very common in the Middle Ages; and the reaction against these abuses was natural. But the practice of invocation, in the sense of asking the saints for their prayers, was a practice of the ancient and undivided Church. And if a practice has Catholic authority, and is congruous with the whole system of religion as set forth in holy Scripture and in the other customs of the Church, and if the loss of it has led to a serious impoverishment of the religion of those who have lost it, there seems to be every reason why it should be restored.

Certainly there can be no question of disobedience to the Church of England in the use of invocation in private prayer; for even if Article XXII were to be held to condemn it, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion are not binding upon the laity. But in all probability Article XXII only condemns the abuse of it. (That is an intricate historical question which cannot be discussed further within the limits of this paper.) And there can be no question of disloyalty to the Church of England in the desire for its reintroduction under due authority into public worship, unless a view of the infallibility of the Reformers be taken which is contrary to the whole spirit and temper of the Church. Experience has proved that the loss of it has meant the impoverishment of the religion of many. 'The supplication of a

righteous man availeth much in its working.' The saints are those who are pre-eminently righteous. Do not let us be afraid to claim for ourselves the benefit of their prayers.

SOME COMMON FORMS OF INVOCATION OF SAINTS

I

Saint Mary, mother of God our Saviour Jesus Christ, pray for us.

All holy angels and archangels, and all holy orders of blessed spirits, pray for us.

All holy patriarchs and prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, and virgins, and all the blessed company of heaven, pray for us.

(*From the Reformed English Litany*, 1544.)

II

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death.

(*From the Angelus.*)

III

Holy Michael Archangel, defend us in the day of battle: be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil.

IV

Blessed *N.* (*naming the saint invoked*), pray for us.

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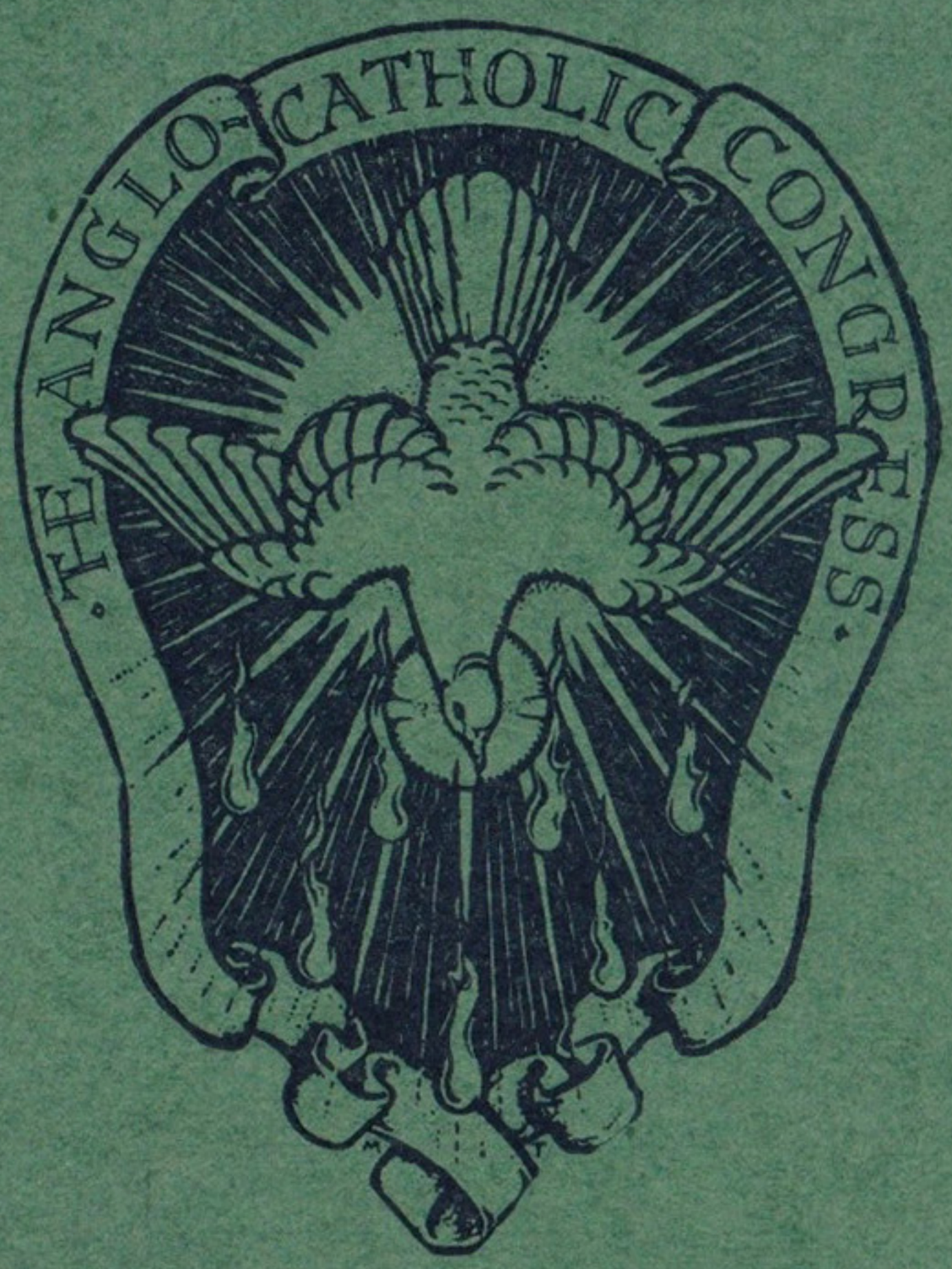

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